

## **EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL**

### **Minutes of a joint meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 11 August 2015**

#### **Attendance list at end of document**

The meeting started at 6.00pm and ended at 7.20 pm.

#### **\*1 Election of Chairman**

Councillor Peter Bowden was elected Chairman of the joint meeting.

The Chairman welcomed Councillors to the joint meeting and reminded the Overview and the Scrutiny Committee Members that voting on any proposed recommendations would be conducted separately for each committee.

#### **\*2 Appointment of Vice Chairman**

Councillor Roger Giles was appointed Vice Chairman of the joint Committee.

#### **\*3 Public speaking**

There were no public speakers.

#### **\*4 Declarations of Interest**

No declarations were made.

#### **\*5 Exclusion of the public**

##### **RESOLVED:**

that the classification given to the documents to be submitted to the Cabinet be confirmed; there were no items which officers recommended should be dealt with in Part B.

#### **\*8 Moving and improving consultation**

The Chairman advised that purpose of the meeting was to seek views on the proposed consultation on the services to be provided at the Honiton and Exmouth offices. Views were sought on the consultation methodology, the questions in the questionnaire, and anything additional Members felt was required to obtain a robust feedback to inform the future provision of services at the two sites and across the district.

The joint committees' agenda papers had included the report and appendix (draft questionnaire and guidance notes) that had been referred to the Cabinet meeting of 15 July 2015.

Karen Jenkins, Strategic Lead – Organisational Development and Transformation outlined that, following the Council's decision to relocate, this consultation exercise provided an opportunity to hear what residents think about which services should be based at Honiton and Exmouth and how the locations of EDDC surgeries might be reviewed or changed when the Council was no longer based in Sidmouth.

The Strategic Lead highlighted that it was important to remember that this consultation would provide the Council with a snapshot in time, and that, overtime, the pattern of customer demand would change especially as the Council was working towards more and more of the Council's services being made available on a self-service, online basis. The Strategic Lead went on to outline that day to day the Council used systems thinking principles to inform where it sets up surgeries and for what type of enquiry – systems

thinking meant that customer demand was monitored to understand types and numbers of customer queries.

The approach to the consultation was a prescriptive one. The questionnaire would be sent to 3000 council taxpayers (randomly selected from the Land and Property Gazetteer database) which would allow the Council to statistically extrapolate the results to the wider population. Responses of over 400 from the random mail-out would be considered statistically reliable. Members were advised that best practice in consultation surveys was to recognise a margin of error of (plus or minus) 5% - resulting in a 95% level of confidence in respect of the way the rest of the population would answer the survey questions. Increasing the number of respondents to over 400 would only increase the margin of error by + or – 3% but would significantly add to the costs.

The Strategic Lead outlined that even without any consultation whatsoever the Council could easily assume that if it was no longer based in Sidmouth, customers who currently visit the Knowle offices every year would want the Council to provide a surgery based in the town. The approach being proposed was therefore proportionate in terms of cost.

The questionnaire would also be sent to a broad range of stakeholders and partners to meet the Council's equalities and best value duties. Later in the process, the equality groups would also be consulted through the design stages of the reception and public areas in the new offices and for the refurbishment of the Exmouth Town Hall. In addition, the consultation questionnaire would be available on the Council's website for interested people - not included within the postal invitation – to provide feedback.

The recipients of the paper questionnaire would be given the option to complete the survey on-line as an alternative. Each questionnaire sent by post would have a unique identifying number so that it would be possible to send out reminder letters should there be a need to boost the return rate and also so that a check could be made on the on-line responses to avoid a consultee responding more than once.

The results from the random sample would be reported separately from the feedback received from other stakeholders.

The anticipated cost of the consultation was £4500 – to be started in September with results collated by the end of November/early December.

### **Methodology – general approach**

Issues raised by the committees in considering the methodology of the consultation process included:

- What was there to stop people completing the on-line survey more than once?  
Officer response: The 'confidence level' of 95% was in respect of the random mail-out as each had a unique identifying number. On-line respondents who do not include the unique identifier will be assumed to be self-selecting and their answers will be analysed separately as their results cannot be extrapolated to the whole population.
- Could the self-selecting respondents use a unique identifying number (such as from the council tax bill) to prove that they have only responded once? There would also be benefit in this approach, as the data would indicate the respondents' location within the district.

Officer response: This suggestion would be explored with Strata officers for future consultations.

- The diversity of the population across East Devon meant that someone living in Exmouth would have a different viewpoint in respect of service delivery from someone living in the rural east of the district. Should the survey be split into rural and urban?

Officer response: Adopting the prescribed methodology meant that results would be representative. The random nature of the survey was essential for the methodology to work. However, as the proposed questionnaire included demographical questions in respect of age group, gender, disabilities and location, the Council would have an option to weight numerical data if necessary (in accordance with best practice) to help achieve accurate levels of representation of certain groups in the district. Differences in responses from towns would be identified as the consultees would be asked to indicate which town they live in.

Similarly, a town-by-town survey would significantly increase costs.

- There might be gaps in the pattern of responses – for example young people being under-represented.

Officer response: This would be addressed if such a problem was identified.

- There was some potential for misrepresentation and it might be useful in the first instance to trial a small sample so that any misunderstanding in the questionnaire wording could be amended.

Officer response: this is not considered necessary as the consultation document itself has received wide input from officers and members.

- If more than 400 responses were received from the random mail-out, will these be included?

Officer response: All responses with the unique identifier will be used.

- There was a need, when inviting on-line responses, to take into account the inadequacy of broadband in many rural areas.

Officer response: The Council was aware of broadband not-spots and gapping provision.

### **Background information on moving and improving (introduction to questionnaire)**

The background information included:

- why the Council was consulting
- why there was to be a move from the current offices in Sidmouth
- the aims of the relocation
- why the move was to Honiton and Exmouth
- services to be provided at each site
- a list of services that would be increasingly provided without the need to visit the offices in person

The introduction would include an explanation of the Council's general duty to secure continuous improvement in the way it delivers its functions – having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness/best value – and would invite ideas and suggestions.

Issues raised by the Committees in considering the introduction to the questionnaire included:

- The statements explaining the Council's current and planned position could distract from the consultation and suggest that the decisions have already been made.  
Officer response: There was a need for some historical context but most of the introduction was about moving forward. The introduction would retain reference to 'best value' as the Council needed to explain its approach.
- People needed to be energised into completing the questionnaire – the introduction was too long and wordy and used council-speak (such as the names of the services) rather than Plain English. Much of the detail in the introduction was irrelevant to the average person. Instead, it should say that the office move was to modern offices, which were well positioned with good transport links. The detail should also include which services the Council provides and the ones for which it does not have responsibility. It should also explain what the questionnaire wording means by access and differentiate between direct visits, telephone contact and email.  
Officer response: The comments were noted - the introduction would be edited using Plain English.
- A motivating statement at the start of the introduction would be helpful. Much of the rest of the detail could be included at the end of the document for those interested.  
Officer response: The covering letter would be drafted in a way that would motivate people to read on and complete the survey.
- Think about how the press can be involved and support the process.  
Officer response: Consideration had already been given as to how the consultation would be publicised to engage the wider population – in addition to the mail-out – and offer the on-line opportunity.
- What was the basis for listing the proposed services to be delivered from Exmouth and Honiton?

Officer response: The decision would be informed by the consultation but the proposed service delivery was based on the need to provide key face-to-face services from Exmouth subject to the constraint of space. An early view is that it seems sensible for all corporate services to be based in Honiton but the survey will inform this. The decision would be monitored by analysing demand. Members were reminded that service delivery would not only be from the two sites but would also be delivered across the district on-line and through mobile working and surgeries. Wording could be changed from 'services that would be available in Honiton/Exmouth' to 'services that would be provided from Honiton/Exmouth to emphasise that service delivery was not just face-to-face but other options, including by telephone, were available. Service leads were responsible for delivery and continually monitored and reviewed their services based on demand. This was the Council's embedded way of working.

- How would surgeries work?  
Officer response: The council already runs surgeries from existing facilities and there would be on-going opportunity to review this provision based on feedback and demand.

## **Questionnaire**

This was discussed page by page – issues raised included:

- This was a real opportunity for excellent consultation but the exercise was in danger of falling into a trap of telling the public what the Council was already planning. This constrained the questions and limited real actionable feedback. The questions needed to be constructed so they were not just asking respondents to agree with the Council's plans.  
Officer response: this was agreed but it was also necessary for the consultation to outline how the Council thought it could create best value in organising its services and this required setting out some thinking that people could comment on.
- Open questions would reduce the response rate as generally, people are put off by writing – a better response would be achieved through tick-boxes/a checklist of options.  
Officer response: the survey would be amended to reflect this.
- Lists of towns – which needed to include Cranbrook - at Q3 and disabilities at Q7 would be more helpful if put in alphabetical order.
- Question 9 should include the opportunity to suggest where surgeries were needed.
- Could the descriptions/wording at Questions 5 and 6 be re-worded?
- It would be better to put Section B (About you) at the end of the questionnaire. It was general practice to include demographical information at the end of a questionnaire. Swapping the order of Section B with Section C might avoid respondents from being discouraged from completing current Section C (Moving and Improving).
- Q8 should include how the respondent accesses services – for example by phone, on-line, email or by personal visit.

In summing up the Chairman thanked Members and advised that their comments would be taken into account. He asked the Committees to agree to the proposed course of action – namely that the methodology be supported and that the introduction and questions be reviewed in line with comments raised during the meeting.

The Strategic Lead – Organisational Development and Transformation thanked members for their valued input. She advised that the document would be reviewed, up-dated and put to Cabinet.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committees voted separately on the proposals and each Committee unanimously supported the resolution and recommendations.

## **RESOLVED**

that the Committees noted and understood the methodology to be used for the consultation process.

## **RECOMMENDED**

1. that the introduction to the survey be reviewed and edited in line with comments raised by the Committees during the debate.

2. that the questions within the questionnaire be reviewed and re-ordered in line with comments raised by the Committees during the debate.

**Attendance list**

**Overview Committee members present:**

Mike Allen  
Matthew Booth  
Peter Bowden  
Peter Faithfull  
Graham Godbeer  
Maria Hale  
John Humphreys  
Rob Longhurst  
Christopher Pepper

**Scrutiny Committee members present:**

Dean Barrow  
Maddy Chapman  
Cathy Gardner  
Roger Giles  
Alison Greenhalgh  
Cherry Nicholas  
Marianne Rixson

**Other Members present:**

David Barratt  
Jill Elson  
Pauline Stott  
Tom Wright

**Officers present:**

Mark Williams, Chief Executive  
Richard Cohen, Deputy Chief Executive  
Henry Gordon Lennox, Strategic Lead – Legal, Licensing and Democratic Services  
Karen Jenkins, Strategic Lead - Organisational Development and Transformation  
Diana Vernon, Democratic Services Manager

**Committee Members apologies:**

**Overview**

Ian Hall

**Scrutiny**

David Chapman  
Alan Dent  
David Foster  
Simon Grundy  
Marcus Hartnell  
Bill Nash  
Val Ranger

**Other Member apologies:**

Iain Chubb  
Paul Diviani  
Andrew Moulding  
John O'Leary  
Phil Twiss

Chairman ..... Date.....